

# STRICTLY SPEAKIN

**Paul Mercurio dances his way to stardom in an acclaimed Australian movie**

GUS MERCURIO can be justifiably proud of his son, Paul.

Actor, salesman, boxing judge and chiropractor, Gus is one of the Australian TV's best-known faces, a veteran of series such as *Cash And Company*, *Tandarra* and *Five Mile Creek* and the mini-series *All The Rivers Run*. He also was seen in *Crocodile Dundee II*.

But Gus has never been the toast of the Cannes Film Festival. Paul has. His debut movie, *Strictly Ballroom*, delighted audiences and critics at Cannes.

"I don't know whether I was the toast, but the film seemed to be the one to be in or be seen at," 29-year-old Mercurio tells TV WEEK. "It was certainly the buzz of the town."

Asked about reaction much closer to home, Mercurio adds: "Yes, Dad has seen *Strictly*. He said he thought it was pretty good and he sent me a note or two."

Now opening around Australia, *Strictly Ballroom* also stars Tara

Morice, Gia Carides, Bill Hunter, John Hannan, Peter Whitford, Sonia Kruger-Taylor, Kris McQuade and Barry Otto.

Mercurio plays Scott Hastings, a ballroom champion who commits the cardinal sin of performing his own routine and dumping his regular partner Liz Holt (Carides) at a grand prix. The powerful but stuffy Dance Federation is horrified, but for an ugly duckling beginner, Fran (Morice), it becomes the chance of a lifetime.

One of Australia's best dancers and choreographers, Mercurio has performed with the Sydney Dance Company since 1982 and was chosen to choreograph the touring company of Jesus Christ Superstar.

"I don't see *Strictly Ballroom* as a dance film, but it takes dance to the people, and that's absolutely fantastic, because dance is a vocabulary and an art form as a means of communicating relative issues," he says.

"A lot of people are scared of dancing because they're not sure what to think about it, or how they're meant to take it. So they don't go to see dancers in the theatre."

Now his appetite has been whetted, it's likely Mercurio will chase more film work.

"I suppose I've always had



## HOLLYWO

"BALLROOM dancing is like Hollywood crossed with a circus crossed with a drag show," says Gia Carides, laughing.

"It was the most amazing experience for me."

Gia was flung headlong into ballroom dancing for her role in the Australian film *Strictly Ballroom*.

● Gia Carides and Paul Mercurio... "I was a complete novice."

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# G, IT'S A WINNER!

● The toast of the Cannes Film Festival ... Paul Mercurio and, inset, his proud father Gus.

the appetite to do film work, and now this is a dream come true," he says. "I've long wanted to do more dramatic-type acting, rather than dance acting, so this was possibly the most perfect vehicle to introduce me to that side of it all.

"The next film I do I'll choose carefully. It certainly won't be *Strictly Ballroom II*."

Mercurio, who cuts a mean flamenco in *Strictly Ballroom*, is married to dancer Andrea Toy, is the devoted dad of Elise Amy, 3, and Emily, nine months, and is a bit of a fitness fanatic.

"I'm perhaps not as fit as when I was doing dance full-time, but in a thing like *Strictly* you certainly need stamina — emotional and physical," he says.

So director Baz Luhrmann made a wise choice when taking a gamble on Mercurio for *Strictly Ballroom*?

"Without being egotistical, I suppose I was perfect for the part, with my dance background," Mercurio replies. "I'd done some flamenco dancing — in fact I'd been in love with it. It's powerful, with passion and sensuality."

Garry Shelley



## OD, A CIRCUS AND A DRAG SHOW...

To play the ballroom dancing "princess" Liz Holt, Gia had 10 weeks of gruelling lessons and a physical transformation.

"I was a complete novice, but I soon learnt that dancing can look easy but is incredibly hard because it is so precise," she says.

"I burst into tears a few times when I couldn't get it right. It was the most physically challenging job I've ever done."

Nominated for an AFI award as Best Supporting Actress, Gia plays opposite Paul Mercurio in the ro-

mantic comedy, nominated for 10 AFI awards.

To play Liz, Gia bleached her hair to platinum blonde and wore blue contact lenses.

And then there are Liz's amazing hairstyles.

"Her hair at the front was like a structural piece of construction with diamantes on it," Gia says.

"And when I first saw the costumes, I was in awe. It's all so over-the-top, but the costumes and hair certainly helped me. Once I was in costume, I just felt transformed.

"That's what I love about acting. Every so often you get a part that takes you into another world.

"This film was one of those wonderful experiences."

*Strictly Ballroom* marks a flurry of career activity for the actress/comedian. She has just completed seven episodes of *Police Rescue 2* and is now filming another ABC series, *The Seven Deadly Sins*.

She also has roles in the films *Greenkeeping* and *Daydream Believer*, both due for release soon.

Chrissie Camp